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# The 'Woman Question' in the Age of Perestroika

Soviet women! Participate actively in the renewal of Soviet society! Rear a strong, worthy successor generation!

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The collapse of 'really existing socialism',[1] and its eclipse as an economic and political alternative to liberal capitalism, has many implications for the populations of the affected countries, not all of them positive.* For the half that is female, there will be both losses and gains. As the state retreats from its self-designated role as 'emancipator of women', to be replaced by market forces, civil society and new ideological configurations, vulnerable social groups—such as women—are threatened by the abandoning of old commitments, and by a deepening of existing social divisions and political tensions. At the same time, such groups are now able to form their own organizations and challenge the limited conceptions of citizenship that prevailed under the old state structures.

Although it is too early to predict the outcome of these epochal changes—in some Communist countries it is still possible to talk of 'reforms' under Party rule, while elsewhere it appears that a wholesale move to the free market is in train—the implications for women are momentous. Feminists might view these changes with a degree of ambivalence: on the one hand, welcoming fresh opportunities for debate as state control is relaxed and civil society emerges as a new political terrain; but on the other, fearing that the 'transition from socialism' will lead to a worsening of women's social and economic position, at least in the short to medium term.

Although at this stage any analysis must necessarily be provisional, it is nevertheless possible to discern some changes in the definition of women's social position within this new context. This article will examine the three most pertinent issues: how those Communist parties that remain in power, or remain competitors for power, have redefined their policies with respect to women; how the socio-economic and political situation of women is likely to be affected by the abandoning of part or all of the orthodox Communist policy package; and how far these new conditions favour the emergence of feminist and women's movements. Whilst the main focus of the discussion will be the Soviet Union and China, where the Communist Parties have remained in power, some of the problems and possibilities that can be identified there have also emerged in other parts of the bloc of countries which emulated the Soviet economic model, its social policies and political institutions—not only in Eastern Europe but also in the Communist states of the south. Whereas the USSR waited until after Gorbachev's advent to power in 1985 to introduce major economic and social changes, some of the Third World Communist parties had begun these well before—China after 1978, Vietnam after 1981, Mozambique after 1983. (In Eastern Europe, Poland and Hungary had begun to liberalize—and to rethink policy on women—in the 1970s.) But even where these changes did not always explicitly involve changes in state policy towards women, the new orientations did affect women through their impact on the labour force, population policy and the family. With the launching of perestroika in the USSR after 1985, the great majority of the Communist states became involved in one way or another in this process, and it became increasingly evident that formerly prevalent views on 'the woman question' were being revised, sometimes radically.

The implications for women of these various changes have been of

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[1] The qualified use of the term 'socialist' prefixed by 'existing' is now an anachronism. No entirely suitable adjective to describe these former states has yet emerged: 'Soviet-type', 'socialist', 'Communist', 'state-socialist' can all be objected to on various grounds. Where, for the sake of brevity, I refer to 'Communist' states or centrally planned economies (CPEs), this is simply a shorthand for those countries which are or were ruled by Communist parties, and claimed allegiance to Marxist doctrine, placing a substantial proportion of their economies under state control.

two general kinds. On the one hand, there have been changes in economic policy entailing a revision of earlier commitments in favour of new goals. There is, however, another dimension to reform, so far confined to Eastern Europe: namely, the loosening of state control and the emergence or expansion of civil society. It therefore becomes important to look not just at what state and party leaderships declare, but also at what emerges from civil society itself, as the power of these leaderships recedes or is challenged. Such an analysis has relevance to more than the phenomenon of perestroika: it poses much broader questions about the previous social role of Communist states, and the nature of socialist transformation itself.

## Women and the Communist State: Before Perestroika

The starting point in any discussion of the Communist states in relation to gender issues is to establish the significance and meaning of their commitment to women's emancipation. In the socialist tradition and in the practice of Communist parties, the process of women's emancipation was seen as part of the overall socialist revolutionary project, combining ideas of social justice and equality with those of modernity and development. In the classical texts of Engels, Lenin and Marx himself there was a recurrent commitment to the emancipation of women from the bonds of traditional society and the inhumanity of capitalism; and this theme subsequently informed the policies of the ruling Communist parties, committed as they were to social transformation. Emancipation in this context came to mean two things: the mobilization of women into the labour force; and the lifting of traditional social constraints and injustices, thereby enabling them to take part in the effort to develop their societies. A number of classic measures (embodied in the resolutions of the 1920 Congress of the Comintern) were adopted to secure women's 'emancipation', first in the Soviet Union, and later in those states that followed in its footsteps. The most important of these were: the encouragement of women to work outside the home; the introduction of legal equality between men and women; the liberalization of laws on the family and marriage; the promotion of equality of opportunity in education; and the prohibition of sexually exploitative images and writing, and of practices such as prostitution. The earliest declarations of women's rights recognized that women would perform two roles: a 'maternal' function and a role in production. The socialist state was to facilitate this dual function by supplying adequate child-care facilities and provisions for paid maternity leave.[2]

Despite their historical significance and positive aspects, these policies

[2] For critiques and assessments of the Communist project with respect to women, see Barbara Wolf Jancar, *Women Under Communism*, Baltimore 1978; Gail Lapidus, *Women in Soviet Society*, Los Angeles 1978; Sonia Kruks et al., eds., *Promissory Notes*, New York 1989; Hilda Scott, *Does Socialism Liberate Women?*, Boston 1984; and my 'Women's Emancipation in Socialist States: A Model for the Third World?' in *World Development*, no. 9/10, 1981. On China, see especially Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China*, Chicago 1983; and Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*, California 1983.

had major limitations. Communist Party officials came to assume—or found it convenient to do so—that the oppression of women consisted almost entirely in their exclusion from paid employment. This, however, ignored both the question of women's inferior position in a segregated, hierarchical workforce, and the stringent demands of their new combined duties. Bolshevik policy on the family, while initially taken with the idea of abolishing the traditional model, soon turned to reinforcing it—while placing it under greater strain—in a way that precluded both a critique of gender roles within the domestic sphere, and consideration of alternative forms of family and interpersonal relationships. From the earliest Bolshevik period, the policies of Communist states towards women and the family were kept subservient to broader economic goals, and changed in accordance with them. Within these authoritarian political systems founded upon centralism and the imposition of orthodoxy, no autonomous women's movement, and no feminist critique of socialist theory and policy, were allowed. Official women's organizations mobilized women in the service of the economic and political goals of the state, in accordance with a narrowly defined set of 'questions of everyday life'. They did not challenge state policy, or tackle the gender inequalities which survived the substantial social transformations.

The Communist record on 'women's emancipation' is one of some advances coupled with substantial failure—an apparent paradox best understood in the context of the development strategies pursued by these states, rather than as resulting from inadequacies in socialist theory itself. Command economies and authoritarian states of the Soviet variety have attempted to overcome economic backwardness by pursuing policies designed to increase industrial and agricultural output as rapidly as possible. The success of these policies was made dependent on the mass mobilization of the population into various sectors of the economy, changes which had far-reaching consequences both for women and the institution of the family. Women achieved formal legal equality and a limited emancipation from the 'old feudal order'; along with men, they gained access to education, employment, cheap food and heavily subsidized health and housing. Yet the cost of this model was high, and its accumulated failures and distortions fell, as we shall see, especially heavily on the female sex.

This policy orientation prevailed in Communist countries from the 1920s until the late 1980s, and despite the varations of culture, history and politics, the Communist parties exhibited a remarkable degree of consistency in this regard. They proclaimed their commitment to 'the emancipation of women' and were quick to declare that the woman question, like those of the nationalities and unemployment, had been 'solved'. Official discourses stressed Communism's achievements in the realms of legal equality and educational provision, but above all they were proud of their record on employment. High female employment rates were achieved relatively early on in the centrally planned economies. In 1950 in the USSR the female participation rate was over 60 per cent, compared with 32.6 per cent in the

USA.[3] In 1980, half the labour force of Eastern Europe consisted of women, compared with 32 per cent in Western Europe; and even as the capitalist states began to catch up, by mid decade only Sweden, Denmark and Finland had higher rates than East Germany (77.5 per cent) and the USSR (70 per cent). The less developed regions under Communist rule also showed significant increases over their capitalist counterparts. Figures for 1980 show that in the Muslim Central Asian republics of the USSR 40 per cent of the labour force was female; in Vietnam 45 per cent; and in North Korea 46 per cent. The average for the Middle East was 20 per cent; for Latin America 22 per cent; and for the Far East (the second highest average after the CPEs), 35 per cent.[4] Although in some cases these gaps were narrowing, they nevertheless remained significant. It was also true that women had entered the professions in substantial numbers—in some cases crossing gender barriers that in the West prevailed to the disadvantage of women. Engineering was a case in point: in the mid eighties, one third of Soviet engineers were female, compared with only 6 per cent in the United States.

Yet despite these advances, it was evident to many outside observers, and to a growing number of people in the Communist states themselves, that women's participation in the economy had brought them neither equality nor emancipation, and that women remained a subordinate social group in both the public and private realms. The realization that women's lot was a harsh one became part of more general criticism of orthodox Communism, and contributed to the rejection of the Communist model by the reform movements.

**Pressures from Above and Below**

From the 1970s onwards, for reasons unconnected with the emancipation of women as such, policy relating to women was seen to require reassessment. The most pressing issues were demographic, and centred on the birth rate: many states became alarmed at its decline, and took measures to make it easier for women to have more children. This was particularly so in Hungary, the GDR, the USSR, and to an extreme degree in Romania where abortion was outlawed and women were coerced into having a minimum of three children per family. In a few cases—notably China and Vietnam—the opposite consideration prevailed, and coercion and incentives were used to bring down the high birth rate. These demographic considerations were directly linked to the growing preoccupation with an economic performance that was sluggish in comparison with the capitalist states; and in the Soviet Union to the additional fear that the population of the RSFSR would be outnumbered by that of Central Asia. In Yugoslavia, ethnic

[3] Labour force calculated as percentage of population ages 15–54. Data from the United Nations Publications *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, New York 1986, and *The Economic Role of Women in Development*, New York 1986, and *The Economic Role of Women in the ECE Region: Developments 1974–85*, New York 1985. These figures are lower than those given by national sources, a disparity due to different methods of calculation.

[4] *ILO World Labour Report*, Geneva 1985.

Albanians were seen to present a similar threat to the Serbian authorities, and 'appropriate' measures were taken to reduce the birth rate in Kosovo.

But other fears, common to these states both in the north and in the south, arose from a perceived disintegration of social life, associated with what some sociologists identified as 'alienation' or 'anomie', and what others linked to the shortage of housing, leisure facilities and consumer goods. The rising rates of divorce, alcoholism and crime were seen as evidence that the state had failed in its duty to support the family. Given the harsh conditions of daily life in most households, it was hardly surprising that families suffered under the pressure; but significantly, the 'decay of family life' was attributed by sociologists and public opinion alike to the pressures on women, especially the 'absent' (that is, working) mother. In the USSR in the first half of the 1980s, theories elaborated by psychologists in the maternal deprivation vein contributed to a general rethinking of policies.[5] The proposal to place a renewed social responsibility on the family would ensure that in practice such responsibility devolved once again upon women. During the 1970s and 1980s throughout the Communist bloc, women's social position became an object of official scrutiny, and the ideological importance given to their role in production was now displaced in favour of their role in the home—a shift which represented a radical departure from the slogans, if not the reality, of the past.

A further link between the crisis of orthodox socialism and the position of women was formed by popular attitudes in these countries themselves. In many cases, the history of Communist Party policy with regard to women was one of a reforming state intervening in society to bring about changes in women's position, often against the wishes and views of a majority of the population.[6] If this was true in the initial revolutionary phase, it remained so throughout the following period. In many cases, the result was that the emphasis on 'the woman question' and on the emancipation and promotion of women, could too readily be associated with the dead hand of the same distant and bureaucratic centralizing state, to be resisted and rejected along with its other policies. Such rejection was particularly strong when nationalist or religious interests were at stake—for instance, hostility to abortion in Catholic Poland, or the illegal continuation of arranged marriages and of the *kelim*, or betrothal settlement, in Soviet Central Asia.

This resistance to 'emancipation from above' was compounded by conflicts resulting from the policies themselves. In the first place, the very encouragement of women to participate in economic activity generated its own forms of resistance: women were seen as being unfairly forced to take on additional burdens outside the home, and the formal equality such employment bestowed was vitiated by the

[5] Author's interview with A.G. Karchev, then head of the Institute of Sociology, Moscow, and leading specialist on the family. For discussion, see my 'Family Reform in Socialist States: The Hidden Agenda', in *Feminist Review*, no. 21, Winter 1985.

[6] For a vivid account of the nature of Bolshevik intervention in Central Asia in the 1920s, see G. Massel, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia 1919–29*, Princeton 1974.

arduous and sometimes squalid conditions under which they worked at menial jobs in agriculture and industry. Despite a commitment to various forms of protective legislation, such as the exclusion of women from many hundreds of jobs 'to protect their maternal function', this covert paternalism was remarkable for its inconsistency. Women had always performed heavy labour in the countryside, where no laws 'protected' them—even from the hazards of chemical poisoning. In the towns, women performed such work as rubbish collection as a matter of course, and in factories frequently carried far heavier loads than permitted by law, and worked in insanitary, polluted and noisy conditions. In the USSR, for example, 98 per cent of janitors and street cleaners are women, as are 26 per cent of highway-construction crews. And, although women were formally banned from nightshifts, over 70 per cent of Soviet nightshift workers are female—a result of a loophole in the law that permits women to be employed for short-term emergencies only.[7] Moreover, the gap between the average male and female wage stood at around 30 per cent in most northern Communist states (a gap larger in Vietnam and China), with women concentrated in low-paid jobs in 'feminized' occupations, their distribution in the labour force subject to marked horizontal and vertical segregation.[8] It is little wonder that few women in these circumstances could feel wholly positive about their participation in the labour force, or about government policies in general.

In the political realm, women were excluded even more markedly from positions of power and responsibility, despite a substantial measure of participation at lower levels. Most countries' Politburos contained no women, some had a token one, others a few 'candidate members'; and at ministerial level the few women were typically confined to posts in Health and Education. The policy of establishing quotas for women in political organizations, limited as it was, had its own negative consequences: since women were most frequently promoted in those bodies with little authority, such as legislatures, the very formal representation was contradicted by reality. In many cases, from Bulgaria and Romania to China and Cuba, the most prominent women occupied their posts less by virtue of individual merit than by family ties.[9] The official women's organizations, supposedly acting to further women's collective interests, were in most cases strict adherents of the Party line, and in some were moribund, corrupt entities, a fact which only added to women's disenchantment with political life.

**Mounting Dissatisfaction**

Ultimately, it was the failure of the ruling Communist parties to deliver enough of the promised material progress, that provided the decisive impetus to reform. This was true for the whole range of social policies, but the emphasis on production to the detriment of

[7] Data from the USSR Central Statistical Administration, reported in *Izvestiya*, translated in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XXXIX, 1987.
[8] On the Soviet Union, see Alistair McAuley, *Women's Work and Wages in the USSR*, London 1981.
[9] Elena Ceausescu, Vilma Espin, Madame Mao illustrate this point.

consumption, and the elimination of the independent service sector, were failures with special implications for women. The continued scarcity and poor quality of labour-saving equipment for the home made a mockery of Lenin's assault on the drudgery of housework. The shortages of consumer goods, and the many hours spent queueing, more than offset any availability of socialized domestic services. The low standards and variable provision of nurseries; the lack of proper contraception and the consequent high abortion rates of many countries; the appalling conditions in maternity hospitals; the prevalence —especially in the Soviet Union—of male alcoholism as a response to the drabness of social life: all these factors created special problems for women. Official claims made for the superiority of the socialist order rang increasingly hollow among populations who had made their sacrifices and were now impatient for results.

It is useful to distinguish between the actual development and intensification of these problems and the growing intolerance of them by their long-suffering peoples. Taken as a whole, the economic situation of these countries has been, from the late 1960s, one in which growth has slowed down to the point of stagnation. But in the sphere of political life the crisis consisted in a growing awareness on the part of both leadership and population of the failings of the system, even though compared to earlier periods the situation was easing. This growing dissatisfaction had several causes: an extension of the real economic malaise into other areas of life; a greater impatience with the shortcomings of the system as a result of higher levels of education and the relative relaxation of political controls; a decline in the opportunities for social mobility as economic growth slowed down; and, evident in all matters to do with everyday life and social affairs, an increasing sense that the socialist countries were now lagging behind the West. All these factors had their impact on popular attitudes toward gender issues: the slowing down of the economy and the stagnation of output and productivity levels rendered the idea of emancipation through employment less and less plausible; at the same time, and as demand grew, the failures of social services, provisioning, transport and so forth, became more evident. The higher levels of education amongst women made some of them less willing to accept the subordinate position they experienced in the home and at work. The sheer difficulty of making ends meet, in terms of both time and money, placed households under acute strain. These material pressures were duly reflected in the rising number of divorces and—in the countries of the north—in the falling or static birth rate.

In addition, the greater visibility of the West produced demands for liberalization that had contradictory implications for women. Their forced participation in the economy was itself said to be an oppression not shared by women in capitalist countries, while the stark contrast with the West in terms of the provision of well-made clothes, domestic appliances, child and baby products, and essential items such as tampons and contraceptives, was felt to be increasingly unacceptable. Yet reinforcing this loss of confidence in the Communist record—which came, if not from feminism, then certainly from a general sympathy for women—was a quite different influence from

the capitalist world: namely the desire for greater openness in the area of personal life and in the public depiction of women, whether this took the form of egalitarian sexual freedom, prostitution or pornography. The latter became an important—at least an important male—source of interest in the West, producing a situation whereby the restrictions prevailing in Communist societies were seen as imposing a dictatorial puritanism that contrasted with the free sensuality of liberal capitalism.[10]

### The Emergence of a Feminist Opposition

A further component of the crisis of orthodox Communism in regard to women was that of explicit opposition to, and critique of, the Soviet model by indigenous women's groups. Feminism has always been a beleaguered force in countries ruled by Communist parties. The worldwide upsurge of feminism in the 1970s did not make much impact in the Communist states, where feminist writings and ideas were officially discouraged. The UN Decade for Women (1976–86) can be credited with making some small inroads by bringing Communist representatives into contact with feminists and feminisms from different parts of the world, and focusing attention on the position of women within the Communist states themselves. For all this, feminists remained isolated and ignorant of the debates going on in the movement outside, and many would-be feminists consequently absorbed the Party line that feminism was a trivial Western irrelevance, one especially unsuited to the different conditions of 'really existing socialism'.

Notwithstanding these unpropitious conditions, however, explicit opposition to Communist Party policy has at times been mounted by women's groups. Autonomous feminist forces had survived in some of the Communist countries prior to the imposition of 'democratic centralist' orthodoxy—notably in Russia (Kollontai, Armand, and others) and in China (Ting Ling). From Lenin onwards, feminism was routinely denounced as 'bourgeois', and seen as a challenge to the orthodox line that it was unnecessary because women had achieved their emancipation under socialism. Yet in the mid 1970s, as part of the global upsurge of women's movements, feminist currents began to

[10] One of the first acts of the newly liberalized Polish and East German Communist youth magazines was the publication of photographs of naked women, as a sign of their new freedom from orthodoxy. Rupert Murdoch, quick to cash in on the current mood, has launched a new tabloid in Hungary called *Reform*, which, with its 'full-frontal female nudes', has already claimed a circulation of over 400,000 and is expected to produce annual profits of one million dollars. Such images are still outlawed in the Soviet press, but cooperatives are able to produce Pirelli-inspired calendars for sale to the general public. Meanwhile, *Komsomol*, the Communist youth organization, has presented 'beauty contests' which the Russian feminist Olga Voroninov has described as little more than 'porno shows' (*Tageseitung*, 24 November 1989). (In 1989, in a more domestic vein, *Komsomol* organized a 'Wife of the Year' competition.) With respect to pornography, in a context where sex and eroticism were hitherto identified as pornographic, and 'perpetrators' were severely dealt with, it is little wonder that notions of sexual freedom are crudely fashioned, and feminist criticisms dismissed as yet another form of authoritarian intrusion.

emerge in the Communist states.[11] In Yugoslavia a feminist group of teachers, journalists and writers began to campaign for changes in the laws which affected women, focusing on issues such as rape. In 1979 the Leningrad group of writers associated with Tatyana Mamonova published *The Almanac: Women and Russia*. Their club, 'Maria', produced a magazine that combined ideas of women's liberation with mysticism and Christianity. This enterprise provoked charges of anti-Soviet propaganda, and the group was dissolved, and four members, including Mamonova, were forced into exile over the following two years.[12] In 1982 in the GDR a women's peace movement associated with Christa Wolf opposed the extension, in times of national emergency, of conscription to women; but although their campaign had some success, the leaders were held for questioning, and at the end of 1983 two of them were imprisoned for six weeks before charges were dropped.[13]

During the same period, active feminist currents arose in some of the countries of the south. In Latin America a continent-wide movement developed, and neither of the two post-revolutionary states in the region were immune to its effects. Cuba's hostility to feminism—expressed in Vilma Espin's regular denunciation of its 'bourgeois' and 'imperialist' character—softened under the impact of changes taking place within socialist movements everywhere. As feminism began to appeal to socialists, so the Cuban leadership began to take note. Members of the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* began to attend feminist gatherings in Latin America, and so to enter into dialogue with individuals and organizations from different parts of the world.

Nicaraguan feminists had an important influence on Cuba at this time. In the very different political context of the Nicaraguan revolution there emerged in the 1980s a loyal feminist opposition, one that took an active part in debating and formulating state policy on questions concerning women. These feminists came from a variety of social backgrounds, and most of them were active in the FSLN, the women's organization (AMNLAE), or in other mass organizations. This movement was conspicuous in not confining itself to the Leninist agenda or the Party line on women. In a number of cases campaigns were fought to change Party policy, even over sensitive issues such as

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[11] A definition of feminism is in order here; but such attempts run the risk of being either too broad and inclusive, failing to distinguish between female militancy or solidarity and feminist objectives, or too narrow and based on assumptions that may be sectarian and/or ethnocentric. That there are different feminisms as well as different women's movements alerts us to the heterogeneity of women's interests, and to the varying ways in which they are socially constructed. But what most definitions of feminism agree upon is that as a social movement and body of ideas it challenges the structures and power relations that produce female subordination. Where I refer here to specific groups or individuals as 'feminist', this is because (a) they designate themselves as such; and (b) they conform to the above definition.

[12] For a full account, see Alix Holt, 'The First Soviet Feminists', in B. Holland, ed., *Soviet Sisterhood*, London 1986.

[13] Barbara Einhorn, 'Sisters Across the Curtain: Women Speak Out in East and West Europe', in *END Journal of European Nuclear Disarmament*, February 1984; and 'Socialist Emancipation: The Women's Movement in the GDR', in Kruks et al., *Promissory Notes*.

abortion.[14] From the start, relations between Cuban and Nicaraguan women's organizations were less than harmonious, the differences in approach becoming evident in 1987 at the Fourth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* in Mexico, at which around forty Nicaraguan feminists argued with three from Cuba. Nonetheless, some of this exposure to other feminisms that were not 'bourgeois' or 'imperialist' had an effect on Cuban attitudes in the 1980s. Feminist concerns began to be reflected in some of the research carried out by social scientists, sometimes conducted under the supervision of feminist scholars from the West. In the early 1980s the *Frente Continental* was founded by the FMC, an initiative which aimed to bring Latin American feminism into line with Cuban priorities and—as one participant saw it—to stop it drifting off into less important issues like sexual politics.[15] Limited though these initiatives were, they nonetheless marked a significant and positive advance on earlier views. But, in contrast to the Eastern European and Russian cases, there appeared no independent feminist groups, at least none which sought to enter the public realm.

It was such groups, along with writers and film-makers, who, prior to perestroika, began to challenge the orthodox line that the woman question had been 'solved', and in some cases sought to define a programme of reform that was aware of, but not uncritical about, the situation of women in the West.[16] Given the degree to which the West had won favour with popular opinion in the socialist countries, these feminist currents, unimpressed by both socialist and capitalist records, came to represent an important alternative point of reference.

**New and Old Soviet Thinking**

The transformation of Communist states, epitomized in the Soviet policy of perestroika, has led to the liberalization of both economy and political system, together with reduced confrontation with the West and a loosening of ties between the Comecon states. Initially conceived as an attempt to revitalize socialism in order the better to compete, as a distinct social system, with the capitalist West, it soon became apparent that the prospects for such competition were remote, and that the Communist states were seeking more and more to integrate themselves with the West. Whether in time this would succeed, and whether, if it did, these societies would retain anything distinctive in their mode of political, economic and social organization, remained open questions; what was evident was that these changes involved the sometimes wholesale adoption of certain Western modes of operation, stimulated by reform from above, and in most cases matched by popular pressure from below. One of the hallmarks of the new phase was the abandonment of the old 'internationalist' model,

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[14] For details, see my 'The Politics of Abortion in Nicaragua', *Feminist Review*, no. 29, Spring 1988; and 'Mobilization without Emancipation', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1985.
[15] The *Frente Continental* was established in Cuba after the 1980 UN Decade for Women mid-decade conference in Nairobi.
[16] Films and novels by women contributed to the former in no small measure. For the USSR, see especially Natalya Baranskaya, *A Week Like any Other*, now translated and published by Seal Press, 1990.

whereby other socialist countries imitated the USSR; but paradoxically it was the changes in the USSR that nonetheless greatly influenced and accelerated what was occurring in other states, notably the collapse of Communist power in Eastern Europe. This comprehensive revision has implications for women in three main areas: state policy; political representation; and the economy.

The discussion after 1985 of policies relating to women took place against a background of more than a decade of concern in the USSR about a range of social problems relating to family life. The divorce rate was the second highest in the world after the USA; alcoholism, 'hooliganism' and crime were on the rise; the birth rate was falling, infant mortality was rising, and a high number of abortions (seven million per year) were being carried out.[17] The rubric of 'everyday life', used to summarize these problems, implicitly excluded the issues of gender relations and the sexual division of labour at work. When controls on the press were loosened, and the claim that social problems had been 'solved' was dropped, a greater recognition of the depth of these problems was apparent in press and Party statements.

This concern was reflected in the policies that Gorbachev began to introduce in 1985, and which he enunciated in his address to the Twenty-seventh Party Congress in February 1986. Here he restated the orthodox position: 'Socialism has emancipated women from economic and social oppression, securing for them the opportunity to work, obtain an education, and participate in public life on an equal footing with men. The socialist family is based on the full equality of men and women and their equal responsibility for the family.' Gorbachev then went on to itemize the social problems in the USSR, and to outline the changes designed to enable women to combine their 'maternal duties' with involvement in economic activity: 'in the twelfth five-year period we are planning to extend the practice of letting women work a shorter day or week, or to work at home. Mothers will have paid leave until their babies are eighteen months old. The number of paid days off granted to mothers to care for sick children will be increased. The lower-income families with children of up to twelve years of age will receive child allowances. We intend to satisfy fully the people's need for pre-school children's institutions within the next few years.'[18]

Gorbachev's treatment of this issue included, however, a new element: the revival of the women's councils within places of work or in residential areas to 'resolve a wide range of social problems arising in the life of our society'. These women's councils, or *zhensovieti*, mushroomed in the following years, so that by April 1988 there were reported to be 236,000 such councils in existence, involving 2.3 million women. This emphasis on the political involvement of women was developed later to include the promotion of women within political

[17] See Hilary Pilkington, 'Abortion, Contraception and the Future of Mother Russia', mimeograph.
[18] *Soviet News*, 26 February 1986.

organizations as a whole. Indeed, Gorbachev's treatment of issues relating to women and the family developed, as did so much of his policy, with an increasing radicalization as glasnost revealed the scope of the problems of 'private life'. By the time of the special Party conference in June 1988, Gorbachev was placing particular stress on the importance of women's political activity as such, beyond the restricted realm of the *zhensovieti* and improvements in 'everyday life': 'Women are not duly represented in governing bodies. And the women's movement as a whole, which gained momentum after the October Revolution, has gradually come to a standstill or become formal (that is, bureaucratized).'[19]

Beyond the policies themselves lay the issue of whether perestroika would succeed, bringing the political liberalization necessary for an effective women's movement to emerge, and consolidating the social services, consumer goods and living conditions that would materially benefit women. This issue would, in the long run, be decisive for women; yet it was precisely here that the contradictory character of the Soviet reforms became clearest. In the political sphere, Gorbachev called for a revival of women's soviets and women's movements. Yet as Soviet writers were soon to point out, the work of the *zhensovieti* required a willingness on the part of Party and employment officials to listen to what they said.

**Declining State Power and the Rise of Unofficial Groups**

The call for women to be promoted to positions of authority was also compromised by the decreasing power of the state—whatever Gorbachev called for was not necessarily going to occur. In the March 1989 elections to the Congress of Peoples Deputies the percentage of women elected fell by over half, from 34.5 per cent to 15.6 per cent. (This plummeting representation occurred throughout Eastern Europe. In Poland in January 1988 the number of women holding parliamentary seats fell from 20.2 per cent to 13.3; and after 1989 similar drops were registered in Romania [from one third of all seats to only 3.5 per cent]; in Czechoslovakia [from 29.5 per cent to 6 per cent]; in Hungary [from 20 per cent to 7 per cent].) In the local elections held this spring, the percentage of women elected to the RSFSR Congress fell from 35 per cent to just 5 per cent. This was due in large part to the cancelling of previous quota systems which had guaranteed the representation of certain social groups such as workers, peasants and women; under these, women had 33 per cent of the seats in the Supreme Soviet and 50 per cent in local soviets. However, Gorbachev showed that he could and would act in areas under leadership control, such as in the promotion of women to more senior posts. In September 1988, for the first time in twenty-eight years, a woman, Alexandra Biriukova, was appointed a candidate member of the CPSU Politburo, a post she held until the reshuffle of July 1990. But amidst widespread indifference, and hostility to what was seen as traditional authoritarian imposition of quotas from above, it was an open question how successful any state-led promotion of women's political presence

[19] *Soviet News*, 19 June 1988.

would be. One of the pre-election opinion polls revealed the strength of popular prejudice against women in politics: 'being a man' was the main quality favoured in a candidate.

Outside the formal realm of institutionalized politics, glasnost opened up a new context for political action by unofficial groups—a few within the socialist tradition, others liberal, nationalist and religious. The years after 1985 saw a political explosion in the USSR as previously repressed tendencies erupted into public life. No greater limitations were placed on the formation of women's organizations and the expression of their demands than on any other group. All groups still had to ask permission to exist; not all did. Yet it was striking how, amidst this plethora of forces, new and old, feminist groups and gender issues appeared to play such a small role. The religious and nationalist groups paid scant attention to them, beyond routine calls for the end to women's 'involuntary emancipation' and return to the 'home and hearth'.[20] The 'informal' political forces were little better: in the People's Front that emerged in 1989, women's issues were not given any prominence, and women speakers seemed few and far between in the liberalized political atmosphere. Only five out of 1,256 delegates spoke at the June 1988 Party conference, and only one of these raised issues pertaining to women. Ironically, it seemed that socialist state policy on women, which had not achieved their emancipation, succeeded instead in alienating the population from any serious commitment to a feminist programme.

The liberalization of the economy had even more contradictory implications for women. Official sources and newspapers were increasingly admitting that the supposed emancipation of women through participation in economic activity had not occurred. The findings of feminists and sociologists documenting the double burden of women's lives appeared in *Pravda*, *Izvestiya* and *Literaturnya Gazeta*; and the theoretical journal of the CPSU, *Kommunist*, even published the first feminist analysis of women's oppression in the USSR.[21] The unhealthy conditions under which many women worked, the evasions of protective legislation, women's low pay and their absence in positions of responsibility were all given publicity.[22]

**The Social Cost of Economic Rationalization**

The priorities of perestroika, involving at least rationalization without technological restructuring, and at most, severe stabilization measures, are expected to result in unemployment in the USSR for the first

[20] 'Statement of the Bloc of Russian Public Patriotic Movements', in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XLII, no. 1, 7 February 1990.
[21] N. Zakharova, A. Posadskaya and N. Rimashevskaya, 'How we are Resolving the Women's Question', *Kommunist*, no. 4, March 1989; translated in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XLI, no. 19, 1989, and discussed by Cynthia Cockburn in *Marxism Today*, July 1989. The authors have now founded a Gender Studies Centre in Moscow.
[22] According to Zakharova et al., almost 33 per cent of all women earn less than 100 roubles per month, while the corresponding figure for men is 2 per cent. Some 90 per cent of low-paid employees are women, while 7 per cent of women hold positions of authority, compared with 48 per cent of men.

time in sixty years. Leonid Abalkin, deputy prime minister, told Parliament last June that between sixteen to nineteen million redundancies were expected by the year 2000. Women's representatives have expressed concern about the effects on women's jobs. Maria Lebedeva, addressing the plenary session of the Soviet Women's Committee, remarked that 'the scholars make no mention of who these people will be. Let's fill in the blanks: at least fifteen million of these will be women.'[23] Other observers have expressed concern that the increased autonomy and cost-effectiveness required of enterprises has meant that managers have become concerned about the social costs of employing women with children, especially after the increased maternity allowances which enterprises were in part responsible for. Zoya Pukhova, while chair of the Women's Committee, argued that 'in trying to exercise their right to have a short working day or a short working week, to have a sliding schedule or additional time off, women involuntarily come into conflict with management and the labour collective of the shop or brigade.'[24]

However, the matter is far from clear cut. The jobs most likely to be affected are in the manufacturing sector, and the most vulnerable workers are the manual unskilled and semi-skilled, and auxiliary clerical staff. But while the first category certainly includes women, the axe could fall even more heavily on men's jobs. Moreover, women in their middle years in both unskilled and auxiliary jobs in industry, while vulnerable to redundancy, are expected to find other work more easily than men in the expanding and already feminized service sector.[25] Women may also find employment in some of the newer light industries being planned. Segregated employment patterns, for all their disadvantages, especially in terms of pay, often serve as protected areas resistant to competition from new labour reserves.

Some female unemployment will occur (as it has already in Hungary and Poland), but one certain outcome is an intensification of gender *segregation* in employment. Working women will find themselves assailed by contradictory messages. On the one hand, economists believe that women are still needed in the labour force, especially if perestroika results in the growth of new light industries and a more developed service sector; while on the other, women are being called upon to take greater responsibility in the home, and to have more children. More than one Soviet commentator has suggested that economic restructuring requiring the loss of labour makes it necessary for women to give up their jobs and return to the home to care for their families. A convenient link between increasing the population and raising productivity is thereby established. Predictably, the group of Russian patriots associated with *Pamyat* welcomes 'modernization' as a 'way to raise production standards and free woman from involuntary emancipation and return her to the family, where she fills

[23] See the report by Maria Lebedeva from the plenary session of the Soviet Women's Committee, in *Izvestiya*, 23 October 1988, p. 6, excerpted in *The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XL, no. 43, 1988, p. 23.
[24] *Pravda*, 2 July 1988.
[25] See Alistair McAuley, 'Perestroika: Implications for Employment', in Martin Macauley, ed., *Gorbachev and Perestroika*, London, forthcoming.

the role of mother, keeper of the hearth and bulwark of the nation.'[26] However, this is not exclusively a neo-conservative and nationalist position: Gorbachev, too, has referred to the 'purely womanly mission', investing domesticity and motherhood with an aura of the sacred and natural. Articles in the press frequently appeal for the restoration of a more 'natural' state of affairs 'where men are men and women are women'. (This has long been a trope in social science literature, which in the seventies and eighties analysed the 'crisis of femininity' as resulting from 'women's emancipation'—that is, overwork.) Henceforth, efforts would be made to restore some balance in women's lives, which meant making it more possible than before for *women* to combine home and work responsibilities, and of course to have more children. A four-day working week for women, and shorter hours for mothers of young children, were seriously considered this year by the USSR Supreme Soviet. But part-time work—the compromise that has evolved in the West—has not been seen as feasible, because of the rigidities in the system. (There are only 700,000 registered part-time workers in the USSR, the majority of whom are female.) But one proposal being debated by Gorbachev's advisers in 1989 was the introduction of higher wages for men to enable them to support their dependent wives at home. This startling about-turn in Communist Party thinking was justified in humanitarian terms by one of Gorbachev's chief advisers as the only way that women would be relieved of the pressure of work and be able to stay with their young children.[27]

The reality for most women is that they will need to work, and that they will probably continue to have few children. Surveys reveal that women have taken advantage of the new maternity-leave provisions introduced selectively since 1981, but expressed little interest in giving up work altogether, even if men's wages were to rise significantly.[28] Unless the USSR is hit by a major recession, it is likely that there will be jobs for women to do and women ready to do them. These factors, together with Gorbachev's proposed reduction in hours, may keep most Soviet women in the workforce, but they will only increase the divisions between men and women workers, both materially and ideologically, as motherhood and household tasks increasingly distinguish men from women as workers with different social attributes and different responsibilities.

**The Effects of Economic Liberalization in China**

The discussion has so far focused on the implications for Soviet

[26] 'Statement of the Bloc of Russian Public Patriotic Movements'. This discourse is given particular meaning within nationalist movements, where the reintegration of women within the family is seen as part of the move against the oppressive Soviet legacy. This patriarchal chauvinism is clearly visible, for instance, in the Smallholder's Party of Hungary (slogan 'God, Fatherland and Family') which sees sovietization as responsible for 'denaturing women'.

[27] Author's conversation with Tatyana Zaslavskaya, author of *The Second Soviet Revolution*, London 1989.

[28] Polls conducted in the RSFSR have so far shown that less than 20 per cent of women would choose to give up work even if their family incomes remained constant. The picture is very different in Poland and Hungary, where women's responses are more varied, with around 45 per cent preferring to give up work. V. Bodrova and R. Anker, *Working Women in Socialist Countries: The Fertility Connection*, Geneva 1985.

women of perestroika. One of the hallmarks of perestroika was its claim that the Soviet Union no longer acted as the model for other socialist countries, which were now free to pursue different, national, paths of development. In the case of some countries, notably China, this had long been the position. In other countries formerly close to the Soviet model, for instance Cuba, there has been a great resistance to current Soviet policy. Whilst in the USSR perestroika involved a simultaneous liberalization of economic and political life, in some of the less developed countries a measure of economic liberalization proceeded without comparable political change. This was so in China where the democracy movement was brutally repressed, and in Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola and—until its acceptance of political pluralism in late 1989—South Yemen. Cuba, Albania and North Korea, apparently resisting both forms of liberalization, were the exceptions. While recognizing that no single model exists, it is possible to make some observations about the ways in which Communist parties translated the pressure to reform into policies affecting women, focusing on two areas: population policy and economic liberalization.

China and Vietnam are perhaps the clearest instances of how these two policy areas converged. Both states adopted population-control policies in the 1970s as a way of addressing the problem of slow economic growth, and pursued similar incentive packages to encourage a reduction in the birth rate. Both also introduced measures to relax state control over some sectors of the economy. More is known about the Chinese case, where the economic liberalization began earlier and where it converged in 1978 with the adoption of the one-child-family policy. This campaign, aimed at reducing the Chinese birth rate through a combination of incentives and punishments, was more effective in the urban than in the rural areas where production is household based and the availability of family labour is directly linked to economic success or failure.[29] Thus, paradoxically, the economic reforms, which enhanced the importance of the household as a unit of production, have given an unforeseen advantage to those with large families.[30] The tensions generated by the conflict between these state policies have devolved most directly upon the female sex. There has been a rise in female infanticide, and in the abandonment or divorce of women who give birth to daughters; and the toll on the mental and physical health of women who transgress the law is obvious. Many of these problems are exacerbated by the maintenance in China of customary marriage practices which reinforce the preference for sons over daughters. Sons are valued more because they retain responsibility for the natal family when they marry, and this means providing for

[29] Repressive measures are especially prevalent in Tibet. As a national minority, Tibetans are allowed two children, but refugees report mounting pressure (through forced abortions and sterilizations) to have only one. Third children have no claims on welfare provision or employment.

[30] E. Croll, D. Davin and P. Kane, *China's One Child Family Policy*, London 1985; E. Croll, 'The State and the Single Child in China', in G. White, ed., *The Chinese Development State: Change and Continuity*, London, forthcoming; and Delia Davin, 'Gender and Population in the PRC', in Haleh Afshar, ed., *Women, State and Ideology: Studies from Africa and Asia*, London 1987.

their parents in their old age. Daughters marry and leave their family of origin and are expected to vest their interests in their husband's kin. The one-child policy, when added to these practices, greatly increases the premium on having a male child: many couples defy the law and suffer the consequences, the women bearing the brunt of social ostracism, late abortion and sometimes involuntary sterilization.

The economic reforms known as the 'four modernizations', which came into effect in 1978, have also affected women directly, with China going further than many other reforming states in liberalizing certain economic activities, and permitting practices previously banned, such as advertising and Western films. China's efforts to modernize and stimulate production have also involved a rationalization of enterprises to put them on a more profitable basis. As in the USSR and Eastern Europe, this has involved tightening up work practices and laying off labour. Evidence suggests that women's work is particularly vulnerable, and it is they who are often called upon to give up their jobs.[31] Discrimination against women at work is also on the increase, and with unemployment high, enterprise managers have no trouble filling vacancies with men. They tend to see women as a more expensive workforce, as a result of paid maternity leave, crèches and earlier retirement; but since it is usually the husband's employer who supplies the couple's accommodation, this should in theory equalize the costs.[32]

**Changing Patterns of Discrimination**

Testimony to the changes is an increasingly self-confident discrimination against women in China. Amidst the growing criticisms of earlier policies—especially the extremes of the Cultural Revolution—prejudice against women occurs in the guise of being realistic about 'natural' differences between the sexes. The famous Iron Girls, once cast in the role of the heroines of work, capable of doing men's jobs as well as men, are now openly derided as 'fake men'. There is more talk, even by the Women's Federation, of recognizing sexual difference, and less of denying or minimizing it. Soon after the policy changes of 1978, women began to be transferred out of jobs such as train driving or construction work into lower-paid work as clerks, or into light-industry female ghettos. Others were simply dismissed. Women were openly talked of as being especially suitable for boring, repetitive jobs because they were good at rote learning and were conscientious. Delia Davin has listed the forms of open discrimination typical of the period of reform: 'Factories and other enterprises either demand higher examination scores from female secondary school graduates who apply for employment, or turn them down outright. Technical and vocational schools which take secondary school leavers discriminate against females except for recruitment to training courses in

[31] Marilyn Young, 'Chicken Little in China: Women after the Cultural Revolution', in Kruks et al., *Promissory Notes*.

[32] See E. Croll, 'New Peasant Family Forms in Rural China', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, July 1987; Delia Davin, 'Women, Work and Property in the Chinese Peasant Household of the 1980s', in Diane Elson, ed., *Male Bias in the Development Process*, Manchester, forthcoming 1990.

traditional female skills such as nursing, office work and kindergarten teaching. Even university graduates suffer from this prejudice against employing women. Only just over a quarter of students in higher education are female, and China is desperately short of graduates, yet the officials in charge of job assignment report not only that many work units prefer male graduates, but that some reject all women or accept only a tiny number. There have been cases where men with poor marks have been preferred over women with excellent ones, and a notorious instance where members of a laser institute made every effort to recruit a student on the strength of a brilliant graduation thesis, only to change their minds when they discovered her sex. The problem of allocating female graduates is now so serious that some universities have considered reducing the number of female students they will accept.'[33] Although discrimination was rife in the pre-1978 period, it has lately grown on the more fertile soil of the new economic and ideological configurations, and acquired a new boldness.

On the other hand, the relaxation after 1981 of controls over small-scale production has given women forms of income-generating activity some of which can be highly profitable, and which, because they are usually home-based, can be combined with child care and domestic responsibilities more easily than most forms of waged work. The Women's Federation of China, deploring the conditions most women face in industrial jobs, has even expressed the view that women should keep out of industry if they can, as it places them under too much pressure. It has called on women instead to make 'commodity production'—that is, 'sideline' activities—their favoured area of work. This kind of small enterprise is found equally in the urban and the rural areas. In the former, women more typically work with other members of the family running small businesses providing goods and services. Though women may benefit from sideline production and from the higher standard of living it could bring, there are longer-term dangers inherent in the deepening sexual division of labour that has attended women's re-integration into family-based production and abdication from the public realm of work. Moreover, as feminist scholars have pointed out, although the old work-point system contained its own inequalities, it had the merit of making women's contributions visible, and conferring status on the earner. In the new family-based production systems, the income generated is controlled by the male family head, and women's contribution is usually invisible.

The new property laws have negative consequences for women. Land has become available to households through the contract system, which is usually made out to male heads of household. As Delia Davin notes, 'a peasant woman's access to the means of income generation . . . now depends on her relationship to a man. This contrasts sharply with the collective era when membership of the collective conferred

[33] Delia Davin, 'Chinese Models of Development and Their Implications for Women', in Haleh Afshar, ed., *Women, Development and Survival in the Third World*, London, forthcoming.

use-rights to the means of production.'[34] This re-inscription of women into the household has been compounded in the countryside by the feminization of agriculture, as men have left to take up more profitable work elsewhere. Although this has placed women in key roles as producers, and sometimes placed them at the head of the household, they are performing work that is unpopular, arduous and usually badly paid.

**New Signs of Cultural Oppression**

In the industrial sector, economic liberalization in China has brought with it enterprise competition and Western investment; it has also introduced cultural phenomena previously banned. One example is advertising, which appeared in the 1980s for the first time in forty years. Before the massacre in Tiananmen Square, advertising expenditure was growing by more than 30 per cent a year, peaking at US$227 million in 1986, 5–10 per cent of which was accounted for by the multinational corporations. The Women's Federation has protested at the uses being made of images of women models, and has called for government controls. But it is not just imported imagery that has brought about changes in the portrayal of women: by the mid eighties the familiar images of socialist iconography—the smiling woman worker at her machine—were being taken down from public hoardings and factory walls. In their place stood the proud housewife, the new consumer, pictured beside her washing machine.[35]

At the popular level, as in the northern cases discussed earlier, there has occurred a reaction to the old puritanism and what could be seen as the return of a repressed femininity, as young women attend to the details of hair, clothes and make-up, and grow anxious again about standards of female beauty and shape. In the literature of the past decade, women writers have been free to reflect on the pain of the hard years of work and self-denial, and have returned to the persistent theme of the lost pleasures of motherhood, of the guilt experienced in leaving the children in care, sometimes for months on end, to fulfil the demands of work. Again, some observers have detected an undertow of 'West is best', and the attendant danger that the disillusion with the past becomes a thirst for its antithesis.

In general, it is clear that those able to afford them can now benefit from the wider availability of domestic appliances and consumer goods. In the period before the student protests, greater tolerance of public debate and discussion permitted the expression of views critical of official and more conservative opinion. The Women's Federation, and on occasion independent women, have articulated feminist arguments defending women's place in society as the equals of men. But such feminist movements or networks that might have emerged as part of the democracy movement would find it difficult to mobilize in the atmosphere of fear characteristic of the post-Tiananmen period.

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[34] Delia Davin, 'The New Inheritance Law and the Peasant Household', *in The Journal of Communist Studies*, vol. 3, December 1987.
[35] E. Croll, *China After Mao*, London 1984.

It is evident that perestroika, or economic liberalization, has produced, in a variety of countries, a major shift away from some of the central tenets of Communist Party belief and policy with respect to women. This is as true of official thinking as it is of publicly expressed popular attitudes. If the old policies, based on a combination of some principle and much instrumentalism, had the merit of promoting positive changes in the name of 'women's emancipation', their overall validity, and the legitimacy of their official language, are now in doubt. The 'woman question', a phrase as redolent of old thinking as 'internationalism', may well disappear, and gender issues—if raised at all—will henceforth be formulated in a very different political language.

The paradox of this change is, however, that the underlying problem will endure: the absence in most countries of a strong feminist input into policy—whether from above or below—means that the policies adopted with respect to women will continue to be determined by the overall priorities of the state, whether economic, demographic or social. Questions of social justice, visions of a society in which old privileges and authority patterns have been surpassed, are unlikely to form an integral part of the new direction of economic development, which for the foreseeable future is more likely to be premissed on harsh policies of economic stabilization and adjustment.

As in the pre-reform period, the issue is not so much one of how great the commitment of the state is to women's emancipation, but rather of the very conception of gender relations upon which future policies will be based. The particular issue of gendered divisions in employment and in the home was never seriously tackled by government policies. Instead, in most countries, while the material effects of inequality (women's double burden) were deplored, the divisions themselves, far from being seen as socially constructed, were increasingly talked of as natural, even desirable, by planners and populace alike, as a reaction to the extremism of earlier years.

Traditional gender divisions were reinforced through the structural and ideological biases inherent in policy and in the organization of society. Scarcity and financial hardship deepened the division of labour and mutual dependency in the family. For many households living on the edge of economic viability, both men and women performed a 'double shift': men took a second job or worked in the informal economy, while women put their remaining energies after a day out at work into managing the household, bartering scarce goods and services, and caring for children and relatives. The family, despite all its tensions, evident in soaring divorce rates, was often regarded as a refuge or as a site of resistance against the authoritarian state and suffocating public life. Many women expressed longings to have motherhood and femininity restored to them. These factors taken together implied that reforms aimed at reinforcing women's ties to the family would find substantial resonance within the populations of these states, even if their effect was to intensify gender segregation and inequality.

Meanwhile, the threatened roll-back of women's reproductive rights, particularly with respect to abortion, gathers pace in a number of countries as a result of religious, demographic or neo-conservative pressures. In the USSR this issue has already attracted more attention in a period of 'openness' and speaking the truth. The high abortion rate and horrific conditions in clinics (something which Mamonova's group condemned, and were charged with making anti-Soviet propaganda for revealing) have been the subject of wide public discussion since 1985. The fact that the number of abortions exceeds live births is not so much discussed as a failing of the system's provision of birth-control devices, than as a moral failing of the society—and, to be more precise, another symptom of corrupted femininity. In other states, legislative changes have already been accepted. In Poland, for example, a bill to 'defend the unborn child' by criminalizing abortion was introduced last June. It proposes a three-year prison sentence for those infringing the law. An intense public debate is now under way with the outcome still uncertain. In Germany, unification under Christian Democracy threatens to impose restrictions on abortion in the East, to bring it more into line with the West where it is illegal unless a panel of doctors argues that it is necessary in order to avoid 'physical or social distress'. Efforts to impose restrictions on the East were successfully resisted earlier this year by feminist campaigners who mounted demonstrations in defence of the existing law. However, there is fear that the current agreement could be overturned in the future. At present in East Germany, abortion on demand is legal and free up to the twelfth week of pregnancy.[36]

In the field of political representation, similar limitations recur. The new commitment—evident at least in the USSR—to a greater political role for women and to the revival of a women's movement is again limited by the continuation of traditional assumptions within government circles. Although these are being challenged by more feminist perspectives, they still have considerable weight. Political liberalization has, however, opened up a space for autonomous women's movements and the raising of feminist issues, and it may be that in time these movements will gain strength and emerge as a significant feminist current in the post-Communist countries. That such movements should be free to publish and press their demands is a necessary precondition for any real challenge to prevailing gender inequalities in the social distribution of power and rewards in these societies. It is also essential that the movements play a part in debates over welfare provision and the negative effects of marketization, and in challenging the simplified view of 'Western' freedom, with its elisions and indulgences of sexism in its various guises.

**The Prospects for Soviet Feminism**

It is early days yet, but Soviet women, some of them self-proclaimed feminists, have begun to make their voices heard in the period since

[36] More than one third of pregnancies ended in abortion in East Germany last year; in the West, the International Planned Parenthood Federation estimates that approximately 15–20 per cent of pregnancies end in abortion each year—about 85,000 of which are legal and another 45,000 illegal or performed abroad; *International Herald Tribune*, 15 May 1990.

1985. Professional women, among them social scientists, lawyers and journalists, have added their criticisms of the social order to the general clamour in their different countries. Women's groups and networks have expanded, with new organizations appearing and gathering strength. In the USSR by the end of the 1980s, women-focused groups and clubs were springing up, predominant among them literary and arts associations like 'Herald', a Moscow club for women writers; 'Women's Creative Effort', organized by Tatyana Ryabikina; and Olga Bessolova's 'Club of Women's Initiatives'—all serving to promote and encourage members' work. Women film-makers and journalists have also established their own clubs, and a Council of Women Writers was set up under the auspices of the existing Writers' Union. The first Gender Studies Centre has recently been established in the Moscow Institute for Socio-Economic Problems of the Population. The objectives of these groups vary, as do their perspectives on women's issues; for example, the 'Transfiguration' (*Preobrazheniye*) Women's Club working in the Academy of Sciences aims to 'enhance women's role and initiative within the socio-cultural spheres'. In Leningrad the human-rights activist Olga Lipovskaya, publisher of the only samizdat magazine for women, *Zhenskoye Chteniye* (Women's Reading), has expressed the view that women's situation cannot be seriously improved without restructuring the entire social system. *Zhenskoye* contains poetry, essays, and even some articles by Western feminists.[37]

Despite a prevailing climate of hostility and ignorance of the women's movement, some women, like Olga Voronina, Anastasya Posadskaya, Valentina Konstantinova and Natalya Zakharova of the 'Lotos' group, have openly identified themselves as 'self-confessed' feminists, and have participated in several international forums bringing women from different countries together for debate. 'Lotos' stands for 'Liberation from social stereotypes', and its members share a commitment to undertaking theoretical work on gender inequalities. Among other things, they have given publicity to the issues of male violence against women, and the rising incidence of rape in some of the Soviet republics. In articles and public meetings, they have also discussed the taboo subject of sexuality, condemning the puritanism and ignorance that surrounds it. Collectively, they have rejected the dominant view of the family crisis, arguing that it results from the as yet incomplete transition from 'patriarchy to egalitarianism', and that Gorbachev's policies aim simply to shore up a system that does not work. Consequently, the group has taken a stand against current attempts to re-domesticate Russian women, and has called for the equal sharing between men and women of household responsibilities.[38] On 24 July this year, they helped to found the Independent Women's Democratic Initiative and to draft its declaration. Two members of 'Lotos' helped to write the *Kommunist* article (see footnote 21), and as a result were invited to submit a position paper to the Council of Deputies, which was later accepted. They now have a role in formulating policy as

[37] *In These Times*, 21–27 March 1990.

[38] From the paper presented to the fifth annual conference of the European Forum of Socialist Feminists held in Sweden in November 1989; and author's interview.

members of an executive body of the Supreme Soviet which concerns itself with 'the position of women, protection of maternity and childhood, and strengthening of the family'.

Nina Belyaeva, a feminist campaigner, has recently spoken in optimistic terms of feminism's prospects in the USSR, but noted that this was not a common view: 'The women's groups . . . I am told, still amount to a drop in the bucket [sic]—and are without clear goals or independence, all of them intellectual clubs.' She added that most women are too exhausted to have the energy for clubs and movements, and speculated that 'perhaps feminism is only for a well-fed society'.[39] If feminism had taken a precarious hold in the Communist states prior to the reforms, on account of state repression, it now addressed equally resistant forces within civil society. More than in any other formerly Communist country, feminism in the Soviet Union faces particularly entrenched opposition. It is derided and caricatured by men and women alike in a social context where anti-feminism draws on motherhood as a powerful cultural symbol to essentialize sexual difference. The writer Tatyana Tolstaya has attacked feminism's 'Western' rationality for misunderstanding Russian womanhood. She counterposes the idea that Russian women are the embodiment of real power in society, a power wielded within the family, 'at times extending to tyranny'. Soviet society, a product of its repressive history and sentimental culture, has, she claims, become almost matriarchal. Soviet women apparently do not need more power than they already have, they do not aspire to equality with men, they do not want to work or participate in politics, they are not oppressed by men (who are poor, weak and broken things, mere 'property' like 'furniture').[40] However problematic and, arguably, unsubstantiated such notions of female 'power' are, Russian feminists have to take account of such pervasive but confused sentiments in their campaigns, if they are to avoid political marginalization.

**Feminist Currents in Eastern Europe**

Feminist currents—even movements—were active during the 1980s in other Eastern and Central European countries. In Hungary, feminists participated in the opposition movements, and sociologists played an important role by focusing attention on women's particular vulnerability to poverty and overwork. Although most of these currents were composed of educated professional women, there were also signs of working-class discontent and mobilization around concrete women's issues. For the first time, women's sections appeared in some trade unions, with the aim of defending and advancing women's working conditions.[41] Earlier this year a Hungarian Women's Association was

[39] *In These Times*, 21–27 March 1990.

[40] Tolstaya identifies women as the true soul of the nation—the trope beloved of nationalists and conservatives. See her enthusiastic review of Francine du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women Walking the Tightrope*, New York 1990, in *NYRB*, 31 May 1990. For a critical response to du Plessix Gray's portrait of Russian women, see the review by K. van den Heuvel in *The Nation*, 4 June 1990.

[41] This was also happening in the GDR in 1989. It is interesting to note that Soviet miners striking in Siberia demanded crèches and shorter working hours so that they could fulfil their family responsibilities.

formed, and after much debate decided to identify itself as feminist. In Yugoslavia, feminists now speak of the existence of a women's movement, its activists campaigning on issues such as violence against women, for reproductive and gay and lesbian rights, and for policy changes via family laws and party-political involvement.[42] And even in Catholic Poland, where feminism has had very little impact on Solidarity's policies, there were stirrings in 1989 when Polish women demonstrated in their thousands against the proposed bill to criminalize abortion. In October, some of those involved in the campaign for reproductive rights founded the Polish Feminist Association. A feminist newspaper, *Baba Polka*, appeared and campaigned to defend reproductive rights. At government level there were moves to set up a women's group to advise on policy matters.

In East Germany, where feminists initiated the independent peace movement and were sufficiently established to organize demonstrations and meetings, the issues they raised were debated within opposition organizations such as *Neues Forum*. Feminist discussion circles generated a number of political initiatives, including the Berlin-based association known as 'Sophie'. In 1989 a group of feminists from Leipzig left *Neues Forum* because the leadership opposed parity of representation for men and women. They joined the newly founded Independent Women's Association, whose manifesto demanded 'genuine equality and emancipation for women', and called for an end to divisions of labour at home and at work, and shorter working hours for both men and women. In a detailed exposition of its premisses and demands, the Association outlined its social programme, which sought to retain the gains of the past but overcome the 'patriarchal power stuctures' that oppress and exclude women. Although supporting unification, the Association favoured 'a mutual process of reform' that respected 'the internal sovereignty of both states'. It argued for a society based on a market economy, but with some planning role for the state to guarantee democracy and progressive, ecologically responsible social policies. The Association called for a 'Ministry of Equity' to be established; for a comprehensive revaluation of women's work in the home and economy; and it favoured quotas for women and men in the areas of social life where one sex predominates. It pledged itself to resist the restrictions on abortion threatened by the process of reunification.[43] The Association achieved some political influence in the Modrow government, nominating a Minister without portfolio, and helped to draft the Social Charter and draw up plans for a women's ministry. In a joint campaign with the Green Party it received 2.7 per cent of the vote.[44]

In most northern states these manifestations of feminism were paralleled by a small but growing representation of feminist ideas and

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[42] Lepa Mladjenovic, 'Summary on Women's Movement in Yugoslavia' [sic], presented to the workshop on women's movements, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, May 1990.

[43] Programme of the East German Independent Women's Association, translated by Barbara Einhorn and published in *East European Reporter*, vol. 4, no. 2, Summer 1990.

[44] Irene Dolling, 'Between Hope and Helplessness—Women in the GDR after "The Turning Point"', mimeograph.

concerns in the press, not only by journalists and writers but also in letters from readers. These may not represent the dominant views, but there clearly exists a range of popular opinion that echoes the concern already articulated by feminists on questions of work, discrimination and the 'double burden'.

The manner in which Eastern European and Soviet feminists formulate their political priorities are necessarily shaped by the particular circumstances and cultural conditions in their own regions, as well as by differences of theoretical approach. Yugoslavian feminists have linked women's issues to racial discrimination against the ethnic Albanians, and have opposed sterilization programmes in Kosovo. The same is true of Hungarian feminists in relation to the gypsy population. In East Germany, peace issues have always come to the fore, and the Women's Association has campaigned with other groups for disarmament and demilitarization, in addition to preparing itself for the abrupt, possibly drastic, changes in social provision resulting from unification this year. Although a broad consensus exists among feminist groups on the question of abortion and contraception on demand, the need to campaign for social equality, and on issues such as violence and sexuality, there are nonetheless significant differences of approach and analysis. In Russia, there exists a stronger current of support for ideas of sexual difference than is the case in Hungary, East Germany or Yugoslavia, with Russian feminists like Larisa Kuznetsova arguing that women and men have innately different psychologies, and that women's embody superior ethical values, reflected in their caring and nurturing roles.[45] As women become mobilized as political actors, it is inevitable that differences of politics and of perspective will increasingly be reflected both within and between women's movements.

**The Future: Emancipation or New Forms of Domination?**

So far, five years of perestroika in the USSR have delivered little to women in material terms, and in a number of other countries they are considerably worse off than under the old regime. In Hungary and Poland, many more women than men have been laid off from work,

[45] Larisa Kuznetsova quoted in *In These Times*, 21–27 March 1990. See also du Plessix Gray, and C. Hansson and K. Liden, *Moscow Women*, London 1980, for ample illustration of the strength of such views among Soviet women. Maternalist and essentializing movements have always posed particular difficulties for feminists, and yet they are among the most common forms of female collective action. In Latin America, for example, women, often in the poorer communities, have been involved in struggles for basic needs provision, citizenship rights, and for other goals such as peace and democracy. Movements of this kind are closely identified with particular social constructions of femininity and motherhood, and the women who participate in these actions often see their politics as a natural extension of their roles in the family, and as based on primordial, intrinsically feminine sentiments. The goals of these movements are usually formulated in altruistic terms rather than as ones designed to advance the particular interests of the actors. In most of these cases, women identify their interests with the household, the welfare of its members, and its conditions of existence in the community. However limited in practice, essentializing movements based on motherhood are not by definition incompatible with all forms of feminism—it depends on their goals, and whether, in defending or celebrating motherhood, they challenge the social devaluation and subordination associated with it.

and everywhere the burden of domestic provisioning has increased, as shortages imposed by rationing are replaced by those created by rising prices. Fears of further unemployment grow along with concern over cuts in public expenditure. Russian feminists have pointed out that the deterioration of social life and proliferating violence in the USSR also have gendered effects—as evidenced by the increase in wife battering and in the growing incidence of rape.

Yet were the reforms to succeed, the overall improvement in economic conditions would greatly reduce the everyday pressures to which women are subjected, and thereby in some measure realize the early Bolshevik hope that economic and scientific advance could lessen the burden of household chores on women, principally by altering the sexual division of labour. As long as men are paid higher wages than women, and as long as many men have to perform two jobs in order to gain an adequate income, then gender roles within the family will not be redefined. The preconditions for tackling the sexual division of labour are, on the one hand, a recognition of this goal by the state and organized civic groups, and on the other, greater employment flexibility in place of the current system which locks men into rigid employment patterns. Women should have the same earning power as men, with both sexes allowed more time for parenting and domestic responsibilities. As Zakharova et al. have said, 'emancipation is a two-way process: men must be given opportunities to participate more in housework and child raising... We think that men as well as women should be able to combine parenthood and career... direct and indirect discrimination against women in the workplace and men in the family should be eliminated.'[46] Their call for government measures and a review of existing legislation to help bring this about underlines the importance of women's claims on the institutions of government in a period when their influence and representation remains minimal.

The socialist programme of women's emancipation has always been subordinated to a particular economic model—a result of socialist theory and revolutionary state practice alike. Women's emancipation is certainly dependent upon the direction of economic policy: no programme of social change can be divorced from the general economic conditions in which it takes place. Yet in order to succeed, the policies of perestroika would have to be expanded to include a commitment to establishing real gender equality, coupled with a mobilization of civic support for such a programme. That commitment cannot be derived from, nor formulated to meet, the requirements of economic development alone. In the end, the issue in question is whether the changes being implemented within the centrally planned economies will eventually provide the opportunity to realize a greater degree of emancipation for women, or whether prevailing attitudes will remain unchanged, and women's inequality will be confirmed by the introduction of new forms of discrimination. Either outcome is possible, but the evidence to date provides few grounds for optimism.

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[46] N. Zakharova et al., 'The Womens Question and Perestroika'.